

Last of the Red Hot Lovers

Review by [Nan Lincoln](#)

It sounded like a match made in theatrical heaven. The excellent New Surry Theater and the venerable old Criterion Theater getting hitched for a fun Neil Simon play The Last of the Red Hot Lovers.

And in all the important ways it was.

By inviting Bill Raiten's troupe for an encore performance of their spring show, the Criterion management has made a clear statement about the caliber of theatrical entertainment they hope to offer here. Last Month it was the superb educational touring production of Shakespeare & Company's A Midsummer Night's Dream, which introduced scores of middle-school children to the Bard in the most thrilling and engaging manner imaginable.

By agreeing to venture forth from their cozy home base in the Blue Hill Town Hall, the New Surry Theater seems to be taking its first steps toward becoming a touring company itself. This is very good news, since the ensemble of actors and directors Mr. Raiten has assembled and created here is simply too good to confine itself to their single Blue Hill venue.

This last effort, directed by Shari John, a Raiten Director's school alum, was a good example. While I found the play (which I had not seen before) somewhat dated, it was rather nice to be taken back to a time when philandering husbands actually suffered some anxiety and guilt over their marital misbehavior.

But it was the extraordinary performances by all four cast members that kept this old chestnut rolling and bouncing along at a brisk, sometimes breakneck pace.

Most notable was Tim Pugliese's frenetic and funny portrayal of Barney Cashman, a 47-year-old Restaurant owner, who decides not to let the sexual revolution of the sixties leave him behind and orchestrates afternoon trysts with three different woman. That he uses his mother's apartment for these encounters, pretty much sums up Barney's lack of skill when it comes to l'amor.

It is impossible not to bring up Jack Lemmon when discussing Mr. Pugliese's performance here. Pleasant looking, without crossing the handsome bar, this actor has that appealing "everyman" quality that brings a certain believability to even the most outrageous behavior. Mr. Pugliese maintains this honesty throughout, making us root for him, even while we hope he will step away from the brink of infidelity.

Well, the poor schlub hardly has a chance of crossing that threshold. His first tryst is with a tall, dark and handsome brunette named Elaine Navazio (Annie Poole) who is far more experienced in these affairs than our Barney. Ms. Poole, a newcomer to the stage but a natural talent and Bill Raiten acting school student, is terrific. I kept being reminded of Mercedes Ruhl, with her deep, voice and deadpan delivery, which turned out to be a lot more sexy than kittenish giggles.

Barney's second assignation is with the ditzy, if not downright crazy, aspiring actress Bobbi Michelle (Willa Parker.) Here again we have a newcomer with a natural talent nourished by Mr. Raiten's schooling and focused by Shari John's excellent direction.

Ms. Parker is all body language, twisting herself into interesting knots and contortions, bounding about the little apartment like a frantic little bird that has come down the chimney. She also has moments of creepy stillness, like when she gets "stuck" turning a lamplight on and off, on and off.

Finally poor Barney brings his wife Thelma's best friend Jeanette (Cindy Robbins) to the apartment. Jeanette however is in the throws of melancholy of near biblical proportions. She feels discarded by her husband Ned, and thus has lost her faith in all mankind. So instead of getting laid, Barney, like poor old Mr. Lot of Sodom and Gomorrah, is ordered to come up with the names of three good, decent people. Predictably Barney's first choice is his own wife, Thelma.

Ms. Robbins and Mr. Pugliese have worked together many times, and it shows in this seamless, fast-paced interlude. Not only does Ms. Robbins reveal her own character, she allows us, for the first time to see Thelma and to empathize with this good, decent woman whose husband may or may not be doing her wrong.

The costumes by Elana Bourakovsky were excellent and reminded me of both what I was wearing (mini skirts) and what my mother (tailored skirt suits) and father were wearing (hats) in the sixties.

The set was perfect, right down to the JFK portrait in the front hall, and rotary telephone.

The only thing missing from this performance was a decent sized audience. The folks in Ellsworth always seem to take advantage of a Saturday night and Sunday matinee at the theater, and the management at the Criterion needs to reach out to, and educate, potential MDI audiences about these terrific new opportunities happening right here in our own community theater.